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WASHINGTON—The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom welcomes the recent statement by Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill that human rights would be included in discussions as part of the “normalization” process between Washington, Pyongyang, and other participants in the six-party talks, and urges prompt and effective action to implement that pledge, which necessarily requires a vigorous leadership role by the United States along with South Korea and Japan. Such a pledge, if carried out, answers a longstanding Commission recommendation for U.S. policy concerning relations with one of the world’s most severe violators of religious freedom and other human rights.

“North Korea’s unrelenting violations of human rights, including the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, remain a serious regional security threat,” said Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer. “Future negotiations should link progress on other policy concerns with specific and concrete human rights improvements.”

President Bush is visiting South Korea this week before attending the Beijing Olympics. U.S.-South Korean relations have been frayed in recent months, though the allies share a common interest in addressing regional security issues. The visit offers the President a chance to announce plans to work with Seoul on ways to include human rights and humanitarian issues in the North.

“Our visit to South Korea in late June showed us that there is a real opportunity to work with our democratic allies in the region,” said Gaer, “to address longstanding human rights and

humanitarian problems in North Korea. Correcting serious problems including refugees, human trafficking, abductions, famine, and a large system of concentration camps for those convicted of so-called political crimes requires new efforts by regional allies. U.S. leadership is essential to ensure progress on these issues in future negotiations with North Korea.”

The Commission calls on the State Department to seek cooperative efforts to include the following issues in negotiations with the North Korean government:

- dismantling the kwanliso political penal labor colonies, releasing all those detained in these and other prison facilities for alleged ‘political crimes,’ including those detained for religious activities or beliefs; and
- ending torture and other forms of punishment of repatriated refugees and other individuals for their religious beliefs, affiliations, or contacts.

“It is vital to keep up a strong U.S. government focus on North Korea and to work harder to end the grave, ongoing religious freedom and human rights abuses there,” Gaer said.

For a full list of the Commission’s recommendations regarding U.S. policy on North Korea, please see the 2008 Annual Report (<http://www.uscifr.gov/images/AR2008/annual%20report%202008-entire%20document.pdf> .)